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Luke, Thomas Gordon

On The High Trails.

(Emily Chamberlain Cook

Prize Poem)

1915

EMILY CHAMBERLAIN COOK
PRIZE POEM
1915

ON THE HIGH TRAILS


By

THOMAS GORDON LUKE

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PREFATORY NOTE

This poem received the fourth award of the Emily Chamberlain Cook Prize offered by Professor Albert Stanborough Cook of Yale University to the University of California for the best unpublished verse, the Committee of Award consisting of Professor Bliss Perry of Harvard University, Mr. Robert Underwood Johnson of New York, and Professor Charles Mills Galey of the University of California.



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ON THE HIGH TRAILS

THOMAS GORDON LUKE

THE BURRO

With shaggy hide my burro turns aside
The lively stick. With dainty hoofs to pick
A careful way round boulders hanging gray,
He creeps; his ear he bobs, and stops to hear
The wind go past. The twilight comes at last:
And through the night he stands out still and white
Beneath the trees; till, when at last he sees
The dawn-fire strike upon the mountain-spike,
With lusty bray he wakes me to the day.

CALLS

A thousand birds upon a thousand trees
On all these green-laced hills this day have sung;
In every song a thousand notes have rung,
Which with their many echoes packed the breeze.
At last the sun of mid-day bathes the hill
Beneath the cliff; and now their songs are still.

REST

Come, let us rest a while
Beside the stream,
And see the water smile
Here in its dream.

Its dream at noon
Is happy, long and deep:
The shade-crossed streams of June
Sing when asleep!

SURPRISE

All day beneath the umber-colored pines
I trailed where purple-shadowing branches spread
Their carpet patterns, till the drooping lines
Of sun fell slanting, smoky, dull and red;
When sudden from a crest the open view
Of far-off mountains, white with glancing snow,
Broke like a magic charm, serene and new,
Across the forest's edge. I saw the glow
Of sunset tinge the crest; and till the night
Watched golden stars unfold in fading light.

THE CANYON

Deep echoes. At the base of this divide
A strip of foam; far down;—still far below;
And clinging trees and boulders on the side
Of each high crest. And yet, in silver, flow
Small springs that leap and circle rocks, until
They strike the foaming river at some bend
Or winding eddy. Swiftly down the hill
They dart and fall and roll; but I intend
To descend
A gentler way,—
Clinging to these wild branches on the gray
Turns of the zigzags, winding farther down,
Deeper and deeper in the mountain-frown.

THE WATCHERS ON THE HEIGHTS

Each peaceful star upon that strip of sky,
Which loves to watch the canyon and its foaming,
Has opened wide a purple-covered eye
To see the cliffs take shadows in the gloaming.
And now the moon rides slowly on the turn,
And in its fire the brooding shadows burn.

CLIMBING

Up, up,—up, up, I say!
The dawn is cool; the cliffs are gray.
No, dragging feet, you cannot stay
Behind. Up, up, I say!
And passing where sunflowers grow,
Still climbing as dawn-breezes blow,
A ragged, hanging cliff we've passed:—
The crest at last!

THE FIRST SNOW

Small patches spread with needles, moss and burrs,
And branches fallen from the pines and firs—
Snow-crystal: underneath, in tunnels, run
Small springs that leap and sparkle in the sun,
Rolling to meadows where, with petals cream
And purple, Mariposa lilies dream.

THE SNOW-PLANT

As on the snowy cliff day dies in red,
And the flushed moon steals up to drink its blood,
So, when old Winter on the stone has bled,
The snow-plant drinks, and rises in the flood.

LOST

All through a dreary afternoon
The sky kept getting hazier.
The sinking sun was like a moon;
Mosquito swarms buzzed crazier;
My burro crept on lazier.
At last there came a sullen growl,
And thunder soon began to howl.

The trail crept over blocking snow,
Then twisted down until it traced
Into a swamp which lay below
Cold, sullen, gloomy, leaden-faced.
Its slowly throbbing edge was laced
With moss, and spear-point trunks of dead
Old tamaracks stood overhead—

Stood firm, with twisted limbs, and white
Curled fingers, heavy, stern and still,
Reflected in the swamp, till night
Drew its damp robes across the hill;
Then ringing hail fell down to fill
The pitted swamp, by branches choked;
And myriads of bullfrogs croaked.

Ahead, below, behind, above,
The water circled me around.
Still splashing through low waves, I strove
To reach by night the solid ground.
But still the sky with rain lines frowned.
My frightened burro trailed ahead,
And left me there among the dead

Old trees. The sharp wind whistled through;
I clung for life to one dead tree;
Strange swamp-lights swam in red and blue;

Near thunder-drums spoke revelry.
As to a mast above a sea
I held there. Through the misty nets
Sharp lightning shot its bayonets.

The snapping wind bore off my cry.
Wildly I stared, but could not see.
At last the weary, sobbing sigh
Of rain fell off and left the tree;
And there I lay in ecstasy,
Thinking that resurrection had
Covered the sky in rainbow-plaid.

A bright, new day! The forest rang.
The trees shone white, like freshened bones.
Above, the yellow warblers sang;
Beneath, blue lizards topped the stones.
No longer rolled the thunder-tones;
But Day, into the forest wild,
Looked through a golden veil, and smiled.

So down I dropped upon the gold,
Still waters of the glistening swamp.
Its shining face no more was cold;
No longer did the mist hang damp.
The sun flashed like a new-lit lamp,
Casting its light upon the shining
Cliff, and showed the lost trail twining

Out of the forest. On I waded,
And passed from sunshine to the night
Of heavy cliff-sides, boulder-shaded,
Where sudden by the trail, held tight
'Twixt trees, and doleful in his plight,
My burro stood. I pulled him free;
And now he meekly follows me.

Above me smoothly sails a dove,
Beneath whose floating wings there lies—
As if from that white patch above
It had just fallen from the skies—
A lake; mild as are happy eyes.
Along its brim a rainbow shines,
And on its edge grow eglantines.

THE FIRE

Deep in the calmness of the gentle night
I slept. Into the lake the moon stared white.
Above, the snowy peaks stood glistening.
Nearby, a fox cried, then crept listening.
A sudden wind rushed past. A hollow sound
Came from the mountains, and, behold, around
Above the lake, a ring of fire rose high,
Melted the glacier's ice, and scorched the sky!

THE SUMMIT

God of the open air, the distant sea,
God of the field and plain, behold my heart!
My love of these is not a thing apart
From all their homage rendered unto thee.

Here rivers take their source, and roll away
Beside the snow-fields, and where forests spread
Their green above the foam. The hills lie red
In fiery hazes. Dim, and ashy-gray,

The desert gleams beyond. Beside it rest
Small lakes. And here where heavy tempests fly,
And storms grow white and passionate, and die,
Victorious upon the highest crest,

I stand, and hear a far-off waterfall
Thunder the hidden meaning of it all!

